"On the spot": travelling artists and abolitionism, 1770-1830

Sarah Thomas*

In the Age of Abolition, travelling artists played an important role as eyewitnesses of slave societies across the New World. While oil paintings appeared in the esteemed halls of the Royal Academy, watercolours and drawings were reproduced in a plethora of travel books and abolitionist literature. This paper argues for greater recognition of the unique role of the itinerant artist in the development of abolitionism, focussing in particular on the work of two European artists, Agostino Brunias (1730–1796), and Augustus Earle (1793-1838).

Artists such as Earle viewed the New World as a boundless source of fresh material that could potentially propel them to fame and fortune. Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802-1858), on the other hand, was conscious of contributing to a global scientific mission, a Humboldtian imperative that by the 1820s propelled him and others to travel beyond the traditional itinerary of the Grand Tour. Some artists were implicated in the very fabric of slavery itself, particularly those in the British West Indies such as William Clark (working 1820s) and Richard Bridgens (1785-1846); others, particularly those in Brazil, expressed strong abolitionist sentiments. Fuelled by evangelical zeal to record all aspects of the New World, these artists recognised the importance of representing the harsh realities of slave life. Unlike those in the metropole who depicted slavery (most often in caustic satirical drawings), many travelling artists believed strongly in the evidential value of their images, a value attributed to their global mobility. The paper examines the varied and complex means by which visual culture played a significant and often overlooked role in the political struggles that beset the period.

Keywords: travelling artists, Richard Bridgens, Augustus Earle, Agostino Brunias, West Indies, Brazil, slavery in art

* Email: sarahbthomas@btinternet.com

Until recently the visual culture of Atlantic slavery has rarely been critically scrutinised.[1] Yet in the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century, slavery was frequently represented by European travelling artists, often in the most graphic, sometimes voyeuristic, detail. This paper examines the work of several itinerant artists, in particular Augustus Earle (1793-1838) and to a lesser extent Agostino Brunias (1730–1796), whose very mobility along the edges of empire was part of a much larger circulatory system of exchange (people, goods and ideas) and diplomacy that characterised Europe's Age of Expansion. It focuses on the role of the itinerant artist—and visual culture more generally—in the development of British abolitionism between 1770 and 1830, noting the shifts in popular attitudes towards slavery over the period. It will discuss the broad circulation of slave imagery within European culture and argue for greater recognition of the role of such imagery in the abolitionist debates that divided Britain. Furthermore, it will suggest that the epistemological authority conferred on the travelling artist—the quintessential eyewitness—was key to the rhetorical power of his (rarely her) images. My concern is not with the plethora of often unattributed printed images—ranging from the small and crude to the more elaborate—which accompanied abolitionist literature, and have been examined by John Oldfield and more recently Marcus Wood.[2] Nor is it the body of work by British artists, including satirical prints, which represented New World slavery from afar. Rather, my interest is in those artists working "on the spot" whose paintings and prints ostensibly had a "higher" purpose—namely the edification of the educated classes—a factor which tends to obscure our ability to recognise visual expression "as an agent of ideological practice", as the late art historian Albert Boime wrote.[3] The images discussed here were not operating strictly within a scientific paradigm of detached objectivity. Rather they were, in literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt's words:

> [...] engaged representations, representations that are relational, local, and historically contingent. The overriding interest is not knowledge of the other but practice upon the other; and [...] the

> principal faculty involved in generating these representations is not reason but imagination.[4]

This essay will concur with Greenblatt's assertion, and suggest that despite the attempts of travelling artists to promote the reliability of their images, that such works should nonetheless be treated with caution.

The travelling artist

Artists who wished to travel had once been largely associated with scientific and exploratory expeditions, and their engraved plates in atlases and other descriptive travel books thus tended to follow the conventions of natural history art. Such artists included John White (fl. 1585–93) who was one of the first English artists to paint North American scenes, William Hodges (1744-1797) and John Webber (1751-1793) who accompanied Captain James Cook's on his second and third Pacific voyages, and Jacques Etienne Victor Arago (1790-1854) who travelled on Louis de Freycinet's round-the-world voyage of 1817 to 1820.[5]

> By the beginning of the nineteenth century however, the market for empirical knowledge of the New World was expanding well beyond the exclusive preserve of the scientific community; a growing middle class with increased time for leisure was eager for words and pictures recorded by "on the spot" witnesses.[6] The rise of books of voyages and travels mirrored the expansion of European commercial and colonial interests.[7] At the same time an increasing number of European artists was inspired by a Humboldtian imperative that propelled them beyond the traditional Continental itinerary of the Grand Tour. Independent travel was becoming easier, and some cities such as Rio de Janeiro were opening up their ports to foreign visitors for the first time. Artists such as Englishmen Augustus Earle and Charles Landseer (1799-1879), German-born Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802-1858), and their French counterpart Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768-

1848), all lived and painted in Rio de Janeiro in the 1820s. Others such as Englishmen William Berryman (d. c1816) and Richard Bridgens (1785-1846) lived in the British West Indies in the early decades of the nineteenth century, while Belgian artist Pierre Jacques Benoit (1782-1854) lived and painted in Surinam during the 1830s. [8] All viewed the New World as a boundless source of fresh material that could potentially bring them recognition and success back home. Images by such artists filtered into European consciousness in a variety of forms. These ranged from oil paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy and the Paris Salon, and watercolours shown by the burgeoning societies devoted to the medium, to individual prints displayed and sold by dealers, and those published in books. [9] Images of slavery—including those with abolitionist intent—appeared in all these forms, although most commonly in printed books and watercolours. Unlike those artists remaining in the metropole whose images of the enslaved were derived from second-hand sources, travelling artists (and their audiences) believed strongly in the evidential value of their images, a value attributed to their global mobility. In *European encounters with the New World*, Anthony Pagden discusses the epistemological authority of first-hand experience that characterised many early European texts on travel to the New World. "[A]uthority could only be guaranteed (if at all)", he writes, "by an appeal to the authorial voice. It is the 'I' who has seen what no other being has seen, who alone is capable of giving credibility to the text."[10] This privileging of the testimony of the eyewitness—what Pagden calls the "autoptic imagination"—had not only been a characteristic feature of travel writing since the sixteenth century, but it had also distinguished travel art, and continued to do so well into the nineteenth century.

Pagden claims, however, that by the time Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) came to write his scientific and metaphysical treatises in the late eighteenth century, armed with hygrometers, chronometers, inclinometers, sextants, quadrants and a range of other scientific devices, that "the age of autopsy had clearly passed [...] Humboldt was confident that his narrative would be assured of its absolute truthfulness [...] he could be

certain of the authority of his "I" – the eye of the "man of science".[11] Some travelling artists, particularly those employed on voyages of discovery, also saw themselves as men of science, co-operating with (and often co-opted by) botanists, and zoologists whose field of vision was just starting to incorporate human beings in line with the emergence of the new field of anthropology. These artists, who like Humboldt travelled with a range of measuring instruments, were thus bound by the well-established conventions of natural history illustration and, increasingly, ethnographic art. Such conventions helped to legitimate the authority of their images, particularly for the scientists whose work they illustrated.

Yet by the 1820s independent travelling artists had a broader field of vision which was governed less by the dictates of science; they tended to look *across* and *through* rather than *down*, at groups of people and / or landscapes, rather than focussing on individual "specimens". While scientific illustration continued to impact their work, most independent artists aimed first to make good pictures according to a variety of European aesthetic conventions, and then to capture something distinctive about the people and places they visited. However, romantic aesthetic conventions—notably those of the sublime and the picturesque—did not confer the same sense of epistemological authority as those of science. Humboldt's artist contemporaries, and those who travelled in his wake, were far less confident in the received authority of their images, and continued to employ strategies that promoted their work's unmediated access to a higher truth.

For an artist there were equivalent yet culturally specific means of scoring his or her text with what Michel de Certeau has referred to as "utterance markings"— "I saw", "I heard", "I was there".[12] While the convention of inscribing the words "d'apres nature" (or English derivatives thereof) below the image, increasingly deployed in printmaking and sketching by the late eighteenth century, denoted merely that the subject was observed from nature (and may thus have been executed in a studio), it was the inscription "on the spot" that more accurately represented the activities of the travelling artist.[13] The term was frequently inscribed by artists directly onto their sketches (and

repeated in printed form), and also used more generally as a descriptive term to emphasise that the work was created in front of its subject rather than in the artist's studio. Colonial expansion in the eighteenth century was accompanied by the development of topographical art, a tradition with which both inscriptions—"d'apres nature" and "on the spot"—are linked; at its heart it relied on the artist's ability to travel. A second key means for a travelling artist to affirm his authority as an eyewitness was to represent himself as a subject within the composition. The self portrait of the artist within a scene is a relatively common feature of travel art of the period. Often in the process of sketching or simply looking, sometimes the travelling artist represented himself as a sentient subject, reacting with wonder at the splendid tropical scenery laid out before him (see Fig. 1), **<insert figure 1>** or even in horror at the barbarous treatment of a slave (see Fig. 7, page XXX). This method of emphasising the essential subjectivity of the travelling eyewitness—the visual equivalent of an anecdotal personal narrative—seems on one level to contradict that same artist's desire to present an objective representation of observed facts, a device which "anxiously sought 'to obscure the production of those representations'".[14] Nonetheless both approaches were ultimately means of privileging testimony, and for the travelling artist and his audience epistemological authority was crucial, never more so than when the subject, slavery, was so fiercely contested.

This desire then, for what W. J. T. Mitchell has termed a "certificate of the Real", helped to create a burgeoning market for first-hand written and visual accounts of the New World.[15] The growing role of the eyewitness was of particular significance when it came to the representation of slavery through the abolitionist decades. Travellers who witnessed the barbarity of New World slavery were often horrified by what they saw, and galvanised into expressing their views. The English travel writer Maria Graham (1785-1842), for example, described the impact of seeing slaves for the first time in Rio de Janeiro:

> We had hardly gone fifty paces into Recife [capital of Pernambuco] when we were absolutely sickened by the first

> sight of a slave market. It was the first time either the boys or I had been in a slave-country; and however strong and poignant the feelings may be at home, when imagination pictures slavery, they are nothing compared to the staggering sight of a slave-market. The sight sent us home to the ship with the heart ache: and resolution, "not loud but deep", that nothing in our power should be considered too little, or too great, that can tend *to* abolish *or to* alleviate slavery.[16]

European artists in Brazil were particularly drawn to images of the atrocities committed against the enslaved. Yet it is dangerous to assume that all images which represented the brutality of slavery were necessarily abolitionist in spirit. After all, the man whose graphic images came to epitomise all that was morally repugnant about slavery, Gabriel Stedman (1744–1797), was no abolitionist.[17] Nonetheless his drawings of slaves hung on gallows and flayed, made famous in the subsequent engravings by William Blake (and commonly reproduced today), came to be considered synonymous with the abolitionist cause. Ironically, images on both sides of the ideological divide can sometimes look remarkably similar on first inspection. Artists' efforts to convince their audiences of the reliability of their eyewitness accounts involved the careful veiling of political views. Yet such views *can be* discerned on closer scrutiny, both in the images themselves and also buried within the context of their production and reception. Augustus Earle's first-hand account of slavery in Rio de Janeiro in the 1820s contained vital clues designed to provide guidance to his British audience as to how they could—or indeed should—respond to one of the greatest moral issues of the day, slavery.

Encountering the Cariocan slave

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Rio de Janeiro contained the largest urban slave population in the Americas. Slaves of African birth or descent dominated the city more than at any other time in its history and were a ubiquitous and highly visible aspect of Cariocan life, performing a wide diversity of jobs and engaging in a broad range of social and religious activities.[18] By 1821 Rio was home to some 36,000 slaves, a figure which had more than doubled since the arrival of the royal court from Lisbon in 1808, when the city had begun its dramatic transformation from a colonial town to a grand imperial city, the centre of the Portuguese empire.[19]

With its cultural aspirations directed firmly towards Europe, particularly France, a lavish building program was initiated, and after several years the city could boast a royal library and museum, a public archive, an institute for the preservation of Brazilian and natural history, theatres, a botanical garden and a royal press. The crown's establishment in 1815 of an Imperial Academy of Fine Arts aimed to provide Brazil with: "great aesthetic assistance in order to take advantage of [its] resources, whose value and preciousness could come to make Brazil the richest and most opulent of Kingdoms".[20] Many European artists were drawn to the city not only to take up posts in its cultural institutions, but also for its potential for royal and aristocratic patronage.

As soon as they neared Rio's spectacular port, European travellers were confronted by the sight of slave ships, and once ashore they were surrounded by blacks, sometimes with filed teeth or cicatrized faces or bodies, chain gangs in hard labour, outdoor slave markets and captured fugitives being publicly flogged. For most artists and writers, arriving in Brazil was their first direct encounter with slavery.

Augustus Earle landed in Rio in 1820, having already exhibited works at London's prestigious Royal Academy. The son of an American Tory portrait painter, he exhibited a precocious talent for painting from an early age. Although only twenty-seven when he first arrived in Brazil, he was already a seasoned rambler, having travelled extensively in the Mediterranean and North America following the end of the Napoleonic Wars.[21] By the end of his life he would become the first professional artist to visit all five

continents.[22] During most of his international travels Earle was a man of independent means in constant search of new subjects for the British market. When financial necessity demanded, he sought portrait commissions from members of colonial aristocracies, notably those in Rio de Janeiro and later in Sydney. The gregarious and well-connected artist was capable of mingling with, and securing patronage from, the upper echelons of colonial societies.

Earle had moved in liberal circles during his youth, and like his German counterpart, Rugendas, it is likely that that he already held abolitionist views even before he arrived in Rio. There he formed part of a liberal European milieu, a rising bourgeoisie which, as David Brion Davis has suggested, modelled itself on the civilised liberalism of its British counterpart, for whom: "there could be no more convincing symbol of civilized liberalism than an avowed abhorrence of the slave trade."[23]

While no letters or other primary sources have come to light which document Earle's abolitionist sympathies, close analysis of the images themselves will argue the case. Earle lived in Rio de Janeiro through one of its most dramatic transformations—from capital of a European empire to that of a newly independent nation. Like Debret, he painted the grand coronation of the prince regent Dom Pedro in 1822, and for another two years he continued to paint some of the city's elite. Yet he was also drawn towards recording the daily life of the underclass. Earle's sympathy for the plight of the dispossessed—which manifested subsequently too in his sympathetic portrayal of the Aborigines in New South Wales—was in part a pecuniary response to the demands of the market. The era saw a proliferation of illustrated travel books which was facilitated both by the development of lithography as well as the expansion of the leisured middle class. By the 1830s images of slave life in Rio (many of them drawn in the previous decade) would find broad circulation in the lavish books of "picturesque" travel by artists such as Rugendas and Debret, and Earle most likely had similar ambitions.[24]

Britain had a strong history of trade relations with Brazil, but by the 1820s Britain's economic authority was under threat. The government was keen to assert itself via what

Brion Davis has called "slave-trade diplomacy".[25] The 1807 Slave Trade Act had abolished the British slave trade, yet in the following years pressure mounted locally for Britain to exert its influence suppressing the international trade. In 1819 the Royal Navy had established the West Coast of Africa Squadron and treaties were made with African and European leaders giving the squadron the power to blockade slave depots and arrest suspected slavers regardless of nationality. When Brazil won independence from Portugal, Britain continued to pressure the new nation to sign an anti-slave trade treaty.[26] By 1823 an organised emancipation movement was underway in Britain, and although its focus was West Indian slavery, the debates and discussions were equally applicable (and indeed more pressing) in Brazil, where the slave trade continued to operate legally for almost another decade (and illegally into the 1850s).[27] Earle's printed and painted images of slaves from the early 1820s functioned as a type of slave-trade diplomacy, in the sense that they were shown in the public domain and designed, as we shall see, for political effect. Britain's continued interests in Brazil's slave trade helped to create and sustain a local British market for words and images which addressed the subject.

In many ways Earle was typical of artists who travelled to slave societies in the Caribbean, North America, and the Cape Colony in southern Africa, in focussing on particular slave subjects, notably dancing and auction sales. Like other artists working in Brazil, he also represented scenes of harsh punishment. While the apparently celebratory nature of dance may at first appear categorically distinct from scenes of public humiliation and brutality, Saidiya Hartman has argued convincingly that all are manifestations of colonial oppression and coercion. In her book *Scenes of Subjection*, she discusses the violence and powerlessness inherent in the "pageantry" of the slave trade, not only in situations of manifest brutality—namely the widespread whipping and torture of slaves, and the pain and humiliation of the slave market and the coffle—but so too in activities which have largely been interpreted as signs of slave agency, such as dance. She notes the close allegiance of spectacle and suffering. "Fun and frolic", she writes, "become the vehicles of the slave's self-betrayal and survival [...]. The body of the slave,

> dancing and on display, seemingly revealed a comfort with bondage and a natural disposition for servitude. [... Yet] the bucolic scenes of plantation life and the innocent amusements of the enslaved, contrary to our expectations, succeeded not in mollifying terror but in assuring and sustaining its presence."[28] A rise in plantocratic control over slave leisure then was firmly coupled with, "panic about idleness, intemperate consumption, and fanciful expressions of freedom, all of which justified coercive labor measures and the constriction of liberties."[29]
>
> While Hartman's sources are texts from the plantations of the antebellum southern United States, her arguments apply equally well to the archive of slave imagery produced around the Atlantic rim. Artists, like writers, were drawn to the spectacle of slavery and the dramatic extremes of human emotion that the institution entailed. Yet their images reveal as much about their own views on slavery, and those of their societies, as they do about the slave cultures themselves.

Music and dance

> The slave dance is one of the most common tropes in the iconography of slavery throughout the Americas and the Caribbean. The images are most often celebratory in spirit, the African drum and other instruments are usually prominent, and the dancers are often represented in an illusory state of jubilant self-sufficiency. Richard Bridgens's *Negro dance* (c.1836) and Pierre Jacques Benoit's *Creole dance master* (c. 1839) are typical examples, with their sense of frivolity and apparent absence of imperial control.[30]

At first glance the watercolour by Earle, *Negro fandango scene, Campo St Anna [sic] near Rio* (c1822) **(see Fig. 2), <insert figure 2>** appears similar, with its ebullient crowd dancing, drumming, clapping and singing. The setting was an area of Rio, the Campo de Santana, well known in the early years of the nineteenth century for its boisterous slave gatherings. In Earle's painting a central male dancer's raised arms suggest the influence of the Iberian fandango, as cited in the work's title, although the dance was more likely the

batuque, a forerunner of the modern samba which was widely practiced by Brazilian slaves from the seventeenth century onwards.[31] Although the titles of the paintings were in fact provided by Earle, it is likely that his knowledge of them and other slave rituals was little more than superficial.

> European travellers to Brazil were quick to express their alarm at such sights, although the spectacle of these sensual celebrations may well have delighted some, at least in private. Earle's scene, seemingly innocuous to a modern audience, would no doubt have appeared far more licentious to his European contemporaries. Little wonder then that on the far right of the image, almost out of sight, the artist has taken the liberty of including the reassuring figure of a Portuguese soldier overseeing the festivities, his long sword clearly visible. In fact the artist goes even further to dispel the viewer's fears by adding, not far beyond the soldier, an unaccompanied European woman and her small child. Perhaps then the figures are Earle's own markers of social cohesion, recognisable symbols of a harmonious multi-racial slave society, although the reality was somewhat different. From at least 1817 city authorities had begun to forbid the large congregation of slaves. They were seen as disturbing the public order, and by the time Earle was living in Rio *batuque* dancers were frequently being arrested.[32] Metropolitan and plantocratic fears of slave insurrection lay behind the increased curtailment of such gatherings, particularly after the triumph of slaves in Saint Domingue led in 1804 to the establishment of Haiti as the world's first black republic. The presence of the soldier is then a subtle reminder that what appear to be slave liberties—or at least temporary pleasures—are in fact the subject of anxious surveillance. Were it not for the element of surveillance, it might be tempting to read this image as one which embodies, as Marcus Wood has asserted of a seminal American watercolour, "an almost unimaginable achievement, a human who has ascended, or transcended to a state of physical and mental freedom even though he is in a legal state of enslavement."[33]

Earle's images of slaves often carry small reminders of slavery's coercive underpinnings. Yet perhaps even more significant for my purposes is their tendency to include a large amount of apparently random detail designed to convince his viewers that he was working "on the spot". In *Negro fandango,* his attempts to assert authority as an eyewitness are strengthened by the inclusion of a figure (to the left, carrying a large jar on his head) who waves directly at the viewer (Earle), inevitably drawing the observer into the scene and thereby collapsing the division between subject and object. This encounter then, between the artist-as-witness and his colonised subject, was carefully and deliberately recorded; Earle wanted us to know that *he too* was at the party, tapping his feet and participating in the festivities.

At first glance, *Negro fandango* appears to be remarkably similar to some of the paintings by another travelling artist who predated Earle by several decades and who worked in the British West Indies. Italian-born Agostino Brunias was commissioned in 1764 by the colonial official (and later governor of Dominica), Sir William Young (1724/5–1788), to accompany him to Britain's newly acquired Ceded Islands, former French colonies, where he was to produce paintings that would encourage settlement.[34] The *oeuvres* of both Earle and Brunias incorporate images of slaves dancing, singing, stick cudgelling and marketing, yet subtle differences between each body of work accounts for their deployment on either side of the slavery debate.

A comparison between Brunias's aquatint *Negroes dance in the island of Dominica* (1779) (see Fig. 3) **<insert figure 3>** and Earle's *Negro fandango scene* illustrates how works which appear so similar could have had such divergent ideological purposes. There are obvious parallels between the two images. The subject of course: African diasporic musical cultures as they were manifest in the Caribbean and Brazil; the significance of the drum (the African musical instrument *par excellence*); and the compositions, including the layout of the buildings to the right of each background. All factors closely bind the works. Yet the subtle distinctions between them are even more illuminating.

While Brunias emphasises order, harmony and civility, and his slaves are engaging in a genteel European-style dance, Earle's watercolour has an immediacy that the other lacks; a raw energy, lasciviousness even. Here is a heaving throng of revellers, eyes alert and mouths gaping; the air crackles with the intense pleasure of the moment. Brunias on the other hand was the invisible witness. Unlike Earle, yet typical of other European artists working in the British Caribbean such as William Clark (fl. 1823) and Bridgens, he was deeply implicated in the very fabric of colonial slavery.[35] So while his print reveals something of the cultural specificities of Caribbean slave life, his primary duty to a colonial patron tied him to a strictly imperial set of ground rules. The harsh and often brutal life of materially impoverished slaves remained largely unrecorded by European artists in the British Caribbean.[36] Far less alarming to a British audience than Earle's more risqué image, it sends a "same but different" message, and promotes the fantasy that slaves could (perhaps even should) be civilised by the benefits of European dress and culture, indeed by the institution of slavery itself.

Seemingly celebratory, such spectacles of plantation slaves dancing nonetheless allude to the deeper tensions that infiltrated plantation culture throughout the Americas. There was no such ambiguity, however, in the representation of another spectacle, the slave market, that very symbol of the slave trade.

The slave market

Earle's images of slave markets gained the greatest contemporary exposure of all his Brazilian works. For example his aquatint, *Slave Market at Rio de Janeiro* (1824), was selected as the frontispiece to the 1824 book *Journal of a Voyage to Brazil* by Maria Graham.[37] Graham was one of the most significant travel writers of the early nineteenth century, and was acquainted with Earle when they were both living in Rio.[38] The print is a close copy of the artist's watercolour, *The Slave Market at Rio* (1823) **(see Fig. 4),** **<insert figure 4>** which shows the sale of newly arrived Africans, mostly children,

bewildered as they await the verdict of a customer who traps them firmly in his gaze.[39] Inside the warehouse in the background a group of faces gaze out anxiously awaiting their fate. Here is the business of slavery laid out in all its unhappy detail, that trade in human flesh which the artist makes no efforts to redeem; even the dog standing by looks weighed down by the melancholy of the situation.

The book was mostly illustrated with accomplished plates by Graham herself, although it contained three contributions by Earle, two of which represented slaves. Besides *Slave Market at Rio de Janeiro*, the other slave image is also a market scene, *Gate and Slave Market at Pernambuco* (1824). Both this aquatint, produced by Edward Finden (1791–1857), and a pen and ink drawing by Earle's brother-in-law Denis Dighton (1792-1827), were close copies of an oil painting that Earle had executed some years earlier. *Gate of Pernambuco* (c1821) **(see Fig. 5) <insert figure 5>** is a dramatic scene of an open-air market, set in 1821 when the region was in the grip of revolution against the royalist government. Here decrepit and skeletal slaves are violently forced indoors, as a desperate mother leaps after her baby who is on the verge of being trampled to death. Earle painted this work in Brazil and submitted it to the Royal Academy's 1824 annual exhibition.[40] It is relevant here to consider the relationship between Earle's images and Graham's words, particularly in light of the fact that Earle had never visited Pernambuco, and was relying for the architectural setting upon a drawing by Graham. [41] It is most likely that Graham recognised Earle's facility for figure painting (possibly even her own weakness in this area), and invited him to contribute images for the *Journal*. Reading the text on the page opposite the print, it is tempting to speculate that Earle's composition was directly inspired by it. Graham wrote:

> Good God! that such a traffic, such a practice as that of slavery, should exist. Near the house there are two or three depôts of slaves, all young; in one, I saw an infant of about two years old, for sale. [...] Scores of these poor creatures are seen at different corners of the streets, in all the listlessness of despair—and if

> an infant attempts to crawl from among them, in search of infantile amusement, a look of pity is all the sympathy he excites.[42]

Slavery was an unusual subject for an oil painting of the period, and Earle's work pre-dates the better-known paintings relating to the subject by J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) and Frenchman François Auguste Biard (1799 or 1798–1882) that appeared at the Royal Academy in 1840, years after the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act.[43] That he arranged to send *Gate of Pernambuco* over 5,000 miles across the Atlantic for it to be viewed not only by London's cultural elite, but more importantly by a large and diverse exhibition audience, says much about its personal and political significance to the artist.[44]

Painting the artist into the picture

There is one image in which Earle unambiguously expresses his view that slavery was unacceptable, and he goes so far as to encourage his viewers to think likewise. He does this by painting himself into the picture as a morally aware and responsive subject. *Punishing negroes at Cathabouco [sic], Rio de Janeiro* (c1822) **(see Fig. 6) <insert figure 6>** shows a courtyard within one of Rio's most notorious prisons, Calabouço, where a naked slave is tied to a *pelourinho* (whipping post) and is being struck by a fellow black, surrounded by an assortment of onlookers. The prison was devoted to the incarceration of slaves. By 1825 most were fugitives who had been captured by the city's slave hunters and were awaiting their owners' to claim them; others were sent there specifically to be whipped, usually for running away or more trifling offenses. Slave owners paid for the punishment per 100 lashes. Prisoners were riddled with disease, and even supporters of slavery regarded it as a den for wild animals rather than as a place for human beings.[45] The wounds from whipping were often infested by parasites and infections of all kinds; not surprisingly, the mortality rate was high.

Earle's spectators at the Calabouço are a motley crew, their responses ranging from horror to bored indifference. They include what appears to be the prisoner's master in the foreground tensely ensuring that his money is well-spent, a cowering prisoner awaiting punishment to the left, and prison guards. Apart from the naked and bound prisoner himself, there are two key figures. Occupying the centre of the image is the tall and muscular black figure wielding the whip. Barefoot—slaves were prohibited from wearing shoes—and scantily attired, his naked torso is adorned with a crucifix and bears the scar from a previous injury. Seated just behind the man with the whip is a white gentleman dressed in blue jacket and top hat. The agony on the victim's face and his cries for mercy appear almost too much to bear, as he covers his eyes with one hand, and pushes the other arm forward. Art historian Leonard Bell has argued that this enigmatic figure, "could be regarded as a stand-in for Earle. He, the executor of the painting, is gesturing, speaking to us, the viewers. It is a gesture of not looking, perhaps "should not be looking."[46] The figure is likely to be a self portrait—Earle frequently painted himself in his paintings during this period. He engages directly with the viewer, and appears to provide emotional or moral instruction in how one might respond to the barbarity of slavery.

Karen Halttunen has shown that by the 1820s a reluctance to inflict pain had come to be identified with "distinctively *civilised* emotions [...] while cruelty was labelled as *savage* or *barbarous*."[47] In her essay "Humanitariansim and the Pornography of Pain", she has charted the rise in eighteenth-century English culture of a "sympathetic concern for the pain and suffering of other sentient beings".[48] Inspired by the moral philosophy of John Locke, this "culture of sensibility" espoused the granting of compassion to those whom society had previously despised, such as slaves. Earle's watercolour contrasts the recoiling figure of compassion with the barbarity of the victim's glaring owner, yet the figure positioned at the centre of the composition is one caught *between* worlds: the slave wielding the whip. Gazing into the eyes of his fellow black with a look of profound pathos, he wears heavily the weight of his horrendous obligation.

Marcus Wood has referred to the "omnipresence of racial codification" in the depiction of the punishment or torture of the enslaved. "If the slave body is black", he writes, "then it is immediately separated from white experience through racially coded psychic reflex. How can a white audience get beyond the acculturated sense that they are looking at a skin that appears different from their own, and which consequently must be assumed to respond to pain differently?"[49] Perhaps then Earle's responsive self portrait was a solution to this problem, serving as a conduit for the transmission of compassion across the racial divide. The captive black body stands with his blood-stained back towards us, an undulating surface of pain and flesh, while the dapper artist, recoiling from the horror before him, provides the European viewer with a point of contact and moral guidance.

Visual culture and the politics of empire

Earle was not alone in his fascination with Rio's slaves in the early years of Brazil's independence. While only a few of his watercolours and sketches were published, many more by his contemporaries were. In their lavishly illustrated volumes an almost encyclopaedic taxonomy of Brazilian slave life and customs was delineated. While Rugendas was more critical of slavery than his French counterpart Debret, both were drawn to "scenes of subjection" highly reminiscent of Earle's. Images of the flagellation of Cariocan slaves through the period were common. One of the most well-known examples of this type is by Rugendas, whose lithograph *Punitions Publiques Sur La Place Sainte Anne* (c.1827) **(see Fig. 7) <insert figure 7>** is by comparison both theatrical yet emotionally restrained, at least as far as the largely European audience is concerned.

What then, do the paintings of Augustus Earle and his New World counterparts tell us about the role of visual culture in the history of the British anti-slavery movement? In the first instance, they remind us of the fluidity of images across media—from *in situ* sketches, to watercolours, prints and large oil paintings, a single image could be

produced in a range of formats, each of which appealed to potentially new audiences. Thus the framed oil *Gate of Pernambuco* was seen by over 70,036 visitors to the 1824 Royal Academy exhibition, while as an aquatint in Graham's *Journal* it circulated among a broad—and probably different—audience.[50] The production and circulation of these images can be viewed as part of a concerted anti-slavery campaign in which both Graham and Earle participated, at least to some extent.

My argument is not that Earle and artists like him were abolitionists per se; nor did their paintings and prints participate in the massive organisation of abolitionism, which Eric Williams has called one of the "greatest propaganda movements of all time".[51] Nonetheless, the political implications of their imagery should be acknowledged as playing a role in the widespread anti-slavery movement in Britain that cut across divisions of class, politics and religion throughout the early nineteenth century.[52] Many artists were highly sensitive to the potential power of their imagery. Earle aspired to the highest levels of his profession, and he recognised the implicit dangers of appearing to be a visual propagandist for a political issue, no matter how significant. Nonetheless, as Holger Hoock has discussed in his book *The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture, 1760-1840*, artistic culture in and around the Royal Academy was deeply politicized by the latter decades of the eighteenth century.[53] Earle's resolve to paint a very modern subject depicting what he regarded as the brutal reality of a slave economy, and to send it across the Atlantic for display at London's Royal Academy, suggests a bold determination to promote his anti-slavery views.

It is important to note here the significant shifts of public opinion in Britain between the late decades of the eighteenth century, leading up to the abolition of the slave trade (1807), and the 1820s when Earle was in Brazil. While Brunias's idealised images catered to audiences which either knew little about slavery, or in the case of his patrons, knew too much, Earle painted for a British public which was far more educated about slavery, and to a large extent keen to see it completely abolished, Earle's story is also a reminder of the authoritative status of the itinerant eyewitness in Europe's Age of

Expansion. His direct experiences with Brazilian slavery led to his visceral horror of both the slave trade, and the institution of slavery itself.[54] Like other itinerant artists of the period he felt a weight of obligation to represent what he saw with at least some degree of faithfulness, and to depict what he considered to be the most distinctive characteristics of Brazilian life. In any critique of his imagery therefore, we must be careful not to confuse anti-slavery sentiment with the empirical desire to record the "truth" of nature. It is hard to pinpoint Earle's precise position on the spectrum of British antislavery thought, and indeed it is possible that he was ambivalent himself. Yet seen as a group, Earle's images reveal a deep empathy with his enslaved subjects which is highlighted by his tendency to remind the viewer of the artist's presence—either by incorporating himself in the visual narrative as an engaged subject (*Punishing negroes*), or by allowing one of his subjects to acknowledge the presence of the artist (*Negro fandango*).

Earle's images usually incorporate signs, however subtle, of coercion or surveillance, although this did not appear to preclude his slave subjects from experiencing the profound joys of music and dance (*Negro fandango*). While brutal treatment was witnessed, it was not condoned (*Negro punishment*). Perhaps most significantly of all at a time when the very humanity of blacks was in question, Earle's slaves are sentient beings—they experience the pain and permitted pleasures of life in bondage.

The larger politics of empire profoundly affected the production and reception of visual culture throughout the abolitionist decades. While by the early nineteenth century British anti-slavery activists were agitating for emancipation in the West Indies, their focus as far as Brazil was concerned remained with the slave trade. Earle and other British artists felt a certain degree of freedom to represent what they saw as the ongoing atrocities of the Portuguese slave trade with at least a degree of moral superiority, confident of a largely supportive reception at home. With the weight of epistemological authority behind them, travelling eyewitnesses—artists and writers—played a unique role in presenting the case for—and sometimes against—slavery and its trade. While much work remains in defining the precise relationship between the imagery of travelling artists and

the development of abolitionism, this paper has argued that the work of Earle and his contemporaries be viewed as a critical point of departure.

Acknowledgements

There are several people I wish to thank for reading early versions of this paper and offering advice: the guest editors of this issue, Dr Jared Hickman and Dr Martha Schoolman, the anonymous reviewers of the early draft, my doctoral supervisor Dr Anita Callaway, and in particular Professor Jerome S. Handler.

Notes on Contributor

Sarah Thomas has held various curatorial positions in Australia, and has lectured and presented papers at the Courtauld Institute of Art, Kings College, London, Tate Britain, Warwick University, Richmond University, University of Adelaide, the University of Melbourne, and elsewhere. She has been a regular contributor to art journals. Her exhibitions (and accompanying publications) include *The Encounter, 1802: Art of the Flinders and Baudin Voyages*. She is now an independent curator, lecturer and adviser living in London. In 2001 her professional standing was honoured by the award of an Australian Government Centenary Medal for service to Australian society and art. She is currently completing her doctorate at the University of Sydney on the subject of *Slavery, race and the travelling artist: Visual encounters in the New World, 1770-1840.*

Notes

[1] Some of the most significant recent work on the imagery of slavery includes the following: Barringer Forrester and Martinez-Ruiz, *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica*, Handler and Steiner, "Identifying Pictorial Images of Atlantic Slavery, Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom*, Wood, *Blind Memory,* and Kolfin, *Van De Slavenzweep En De Muze*.

[2] Wood, *Blind memory*, Wood, *The horrible gift of freedom*, Oldfield, *Popular politics and British anti-slavery.*

[3] Boime, *The art of exclusion*, xiv.

[4] Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions,* 12-13.

[5] Handler and Steiner, "Identifying pictorial images of Atlantic slavery", 51-71.

[6] For further discussion of the significance of "on the spot" witnesses, see: Fraser, "Books, prints, and travel".

[7] Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel-Writing,* 15.

[8] Images of slaves by all these artists and many more can be seen on the website by Jerome S. Handler and Michael L. Tuite Jr., *The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record*, at www.slaveryimages.org. The website is an excellent online source of slave imagery, and incorporates detailed scholarly information about each image and artist.

[9] While Earle in fact never published his watercolours, Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones has speculated, convincingly, that he was intending to do so, either as a volume or more of aquatints, or more likely, to accompany his proposed book *Voyage Round the World*. The book never eventuated, but it was referred to in the original manuscript which accompanied his Brazilian watercolours. See Hackforth-Jones, *Augustus Earle,* 45-47.

[10] Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World,* 51-52, 55.

[11] Ibid, 86-87.

[12] de Certeau *Heterologies,* 68. Cited by Pagden, *op. cit*., 51.

[13] Klonk, *Science and the Perception of Nature*

[14] Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel-Writing,* 7. Leask is quoting here from Matthew Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Georgraphical Construction of British India, 1565-1843,* Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1998, p. 79.

Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 15.

[16] 24 September 1821, Graham, *Journal of a voyage to Brazil*, 105.

[17] Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition*

[18] Karasch, *Slave life in Rio de Janeiro,*, xxi.

[19] Ibid., 61-62.

[20] Decree as cited (and translated) by Schultz, *Tropical Versailles,*104.

[21] Ibid. Entry on Earle by Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Joan Kerr in *Dictionary of Australian Art Online*; http://www.daao.org.au

[22] McDonald and Pearce, *The artist and the patron,* 32.

[23] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution,* 71.

[24] Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones has convincingly speculated that Earle was probably intending to publish his watercolours either as a book of colour prints, or perhaps as plates to illustrate his proposed volume *Voyage Round the World.* Hackforth-Jones, *Augustus Earle: Travel Artist*, p. 45.

[25] Davis, *The Problem of Slavery*, 64-72.

[26] Drescher, *Abolition: a history of slavery and antislavery*, 200.

[27] Bethell, *The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade*. Slavery itself would not be abolished in Brazil until 1888.

[28] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 37.

[29] Ibid., 7-8.

[30] For these and many more examples see website by Handler and Tuite, *op. cit.* which is searchable by subject categories, including "dance".

[31] Most of Brazil's slave population would have had trouble dancing the fandango in its traditional sense because its choreography included a particular kind of foot stamping which required shoes. As for the titles of Earle's watercolours, it is believed that the inscriptions on both mounts and accompanying manuscript are in a hand other than Earle's. See Hackforth-Jones, *Augustus Earle, travel artist,* .6. Even if the titles were in fact provided by Earle, it is

likely that his knowledge of the dances and other rituals of black slaves was little more than superficial.

[32] Karasch, *Slave Life in Rio De Janeiro,* 243.

[33] Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom*, 179-180. This book contains a penetrating discussion of dance imagery, with particular reference to the North American archive, 170-181.

[34] Lennox Honychurch provides excellent biographical information on Brunias in his pioneering article, 'Chatoyer's Artist,' 104-128).

[35] Little is currently known about Clark, although Tim Barringer and Alexander Lee suggest he was an overseer and possibly attorney of several sugar plantations in Antigua (see Barringer et al, *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica,* 318). His drawings were published in 1823 as *Ten views in the island of Antigua, in which are represented the process of sugar making, and the employment of the Negroes*. Bridgens was born in Sheffield, and his early career was spent designing furniture and furnishings in Gothic and Elizabethan styles. He moved to Trinidad in 1825 when his wife inherited a sugar plantation there.

[36] One notable exception to this is a print of executed slaves by Joshua Bryant, in his book *Account of an insurrection of the negro slaves in the colony of Demerara, which broke out on the 18th of August, 1823* (Georgetown, Demerara, 1824). See www.slaveryimages.org reference number BRLIB-1.

[37] The title of the aquatint is slightly different from that given in the list of plates, which is *Val Longo, or Slave Market at Rio*.

[38] She mentions him in her Journal: 'Having now received the portrait which Mr. Erle [sic], an ingenious young English artist, has been painting of the Senhora Alerez Dona Maria de Jesus ...'. 24 September 1823, Graham, *Journal of a voyage to Brazil,* 302.

[39] Both this and Dighton's monochrome drawing *Gate and Slave market at Pernambuco* are now in the British Museum, having been bequeathed by Sir Augustus Wallcott (Maria Graham's subsequent husband) in 1845.

[40] The painting was listed in the 1824 Royal Academy exhibition catalogue as follows: 'Gate of Pernambuco, in Brazil, with new negroes. The Police ordered the slaves to be housed, on account of an attack made on one of the outposts by the patriots in 1821. Painted in Brazil'. See Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts,* 3.

[41] The drawing is now in the collection of the British Museum. For alerting me to this information I am indebted to Dr Mary Eagle, who is currently writing a book about Earle.

[42] 28 September 1821, Graham, *Journal of a voyage to Brazil*, 107.

[43] *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* (Boston Museum of Fine Arts) and *Slaves on the West Coast of Africa* (Wilberforce House Museum, Hull). For more on these see Wood, *Blind memory*.

[44] This painting is now owned by the Pesquisadora Museu Imperial, Petrópolis, Brazil. For many years it was in the collection of Paulo Fontainha Geyer, Rio de Janeiro. While the early provenance of the painting is yet to come to light, it is possible that Graham herself may well have taken the rolled-up canvas back to London with her on board the frigate HMS *Doris,* and on arrival in London in December 1823 have personally overseen Finden's transferral of it to aquatint, the plate which became the frontispiece to her Brazilian *Journal* the following year.

[45] Karasch, *Slave life in Rio de Janeiro,* 121.

[46] Bell, *To see or not to see: conflicting eyes in the travel art of Augustus Earle*, p.129.

[47] Halttunen. "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture.", 303

[48] Ibid., 303.

[49] Wood, *Blind memory,* 281.

[50] This figure was extrapolated from the sum collected from Royal Academy admissions in 1824, although consequently does not include complimentary entries. Thanks to Andrew Potter at the Royal Academy Library for supplying this information.

[51] Williams, *Capitalism and slavery*, p. 178.

[52] Davis, *Inhuman bondage*, 246.

[53] Hoock, *The King's artists*, 127-222.

[54] Several years later such convictions would infuse Earle's friendship with the young Charles Darwin as they travelled together on board H.M.S. *Beagle*. Thomas, *'Slavery, a 'scandal to Christian nations'.*

References

Akel, Regina. *Maria Graham: A Literary Biography*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2009.

Assunção, Matthias Röhrig. *Capoeira: A History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art*. London: Routledge, 2005.

Bell, Leonard. "To See or Not to See: Conflicting Eyes in the Travel Art of Augustus Earle." In *Orientalism Transposed: The Impact of the Colonies on British Culture*, edited by Julie F. Codell and Dianne Sachko Macleod, 117-39. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1998.

Boime, Albert. The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century. London: Thames & Hudson, 1990.

Davis, David Brion. Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Davis, David Brion. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*. New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Drescher, Seymour. *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Fraser, Elisabeth A. “Books, Prints, and Travel: Reading in the Gaps of the Orientalist Archive.” *Art History* 31, no. 3 (2008): 342-67.

Graham, Maria Dundas. *Journal of a Voyage to Brazil and Residence There, During Part of the Years 1821, 1822, 1823*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green and J. Murray, 1824.

Graves, Algernon. The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and Their Work from Its Foundation in 1769 to 1904, vol. III, London: Graves and Bell, 1905

Greenblatt, Stephen Jay. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Hackforth-Jones, Jocelyn. *Augustus Earle, Travel Artist: Paintings and Drawings in the Rex Nan Kivell Collection*, National Library of Australia. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1980.

Halttunen, Karen. “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture.” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (1995): 303-34.

Handler, Jerome S., and Annis Steiner. “Identifying Pictorial Images of Atlantic Slavery: Three Case Studies.” *Slavery & Abolition* 27, no. 1 (2006): 51-71.

Hartman, Saidiya V. Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Honour, Hugh. The Image of the Black in Western Art: Iv. From the American Revolution to World War 1. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Hoock, Holger. The King’s Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture, 1760-1840. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.

Jacobs, Michael. The Painted Voyage: Art, Travel and Exploration 1564-1875. London: British Museum Press, 1995.

Karasch, Mary C. *Slave Life in Rio De Janeiro, 1808-1850*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Kolfin, Elmer. *Van De Slavenzweep En De Muze: Twee Eeuwen Verbeelding Van Slavernij in Suriname*. Leiden: KITLV, 1997.

Klonk, Charlotte. *Science and the Perception of Nature: British Landscape Art in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*. New Haven ; London: Yale University Press for The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1996.

Leask, Nigel. Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel-Writing, 1770-1840: "from an Antique Land". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

McDonald, Patricia R., and Barry Pearce. *The Artist and the Patron: Aspects of Colonial Art in New South Wales* Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1988.

Mitchell, W. J. T. *Landscape and Power*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Oldfield, J. R. Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.

Pagden, Anthony. European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1993.

Schultz, Kirsten. Tropical Versailles: Empire, Monarchy, and the Portuguese Royal Court in Rio De Janeiro, 1808-1821. New York ; London: Routledge, 2001.

Stedman, John Gabriel, Richard Price, and Sally Price. Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam : Transcribed for the First Time from the Original 1790 Manuscript. Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.

Thomas, Sarah. *The Encounter, 1802: Art of the Flinders and Baudin Voyages*. Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2002.

Thomas, Sarah. "Slavery, a 'Scandal to Christian Nations'. Charles Darwin, Augustus Earle, and the Compass of Morality." In *Reframing Darwin: Evolution and Art in Australia*, edited by Jeanette Hoorn, pp. 26-37. Melbourne, 2009.

Williams, Eric Eustace. *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944.

Wood, Marcus. Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Wood, Marcus. The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010